

City officials at odds over officer plan

Commissioner suggests
firefighters do police work

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OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — City Commissioner Tom Ivey has suggested having some on-duty firefighters spend part of their shift helping police officers by responding to minor calls to handle paperwork.

City firefighters work 24-hour shifts with 48 hours off. Ivey, who presented the proposal Tuesday at a Civil Service Board meeting, said that on each shift, two firefighters from the main fire station and two from the Lakemont fire station could act as community service officers for eight hours.

Fire Chief Mike Molthop said the community-service concept is a good one, but using on-duty firefighters for the task is a bad idea.

Community service officers are being used by the Orlando Police Department and the Orange County Sheriff's Office. Using community service officers to fill out reports at minor accidents and other matters frees sworn officers for other duties. The Orlando police and the sheriff's office hire people specifically as community service officers.

Ivey said he thinks using on-duty firefighters as community service officers would be a good way to get the program without much added expenditure. He suggested that firefighters acting as community service officers be given extra pay.

Molthop said he thinks Ivey and other citizens don't understand what a firefighter does on duty.

"The days of the checkers and pool tables went a long time ago," Molthop said. "The city is certainly getting its money's worth out of those employees already. They don't need to place their performance at risk for something like this.

"We don't just jump in those trucks and drive down the road," Molthop said. "We maintain our stations, our equipment on a daily basis, we put on

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public education programs and we have continual training programs."

From October through last December, firefighters accumulated more than 2,200 hours of training, he said.

Molthop, in a written analysis of Ivey's proposal that was submitted to the Civil Service Board, said reducing the number of people who first respond to a fire emergency would affect the handling of the emergency. The three-person staffing levels on trucks is the absolute minimum a department should use, he said.

"If the three-man crew is not with the unit upon arrival at a structure fire, then the operation can be delayed awaiting the arrival of the other person," Molthop wrote in the report.

"The most crucial time in fighting a fire in order to reduce fire damage and ensure the rescue and safety of a victim inside is within the first three to five minutes of the operation."

Similarly, if the three-person paramedic units are reduced by even one person for a few minutes it affects the paramedics' ability to perform advanced lifesaving procedures.

"My whole problem with this particular proposal is it takes away on-duty persons," the fire chief said in an interview. "If you want to play the risk game, go ahead. But don't come back to me because it affects the people."

Ivey said Thursday he had not read Molthop's report.

"All I wanted was input," Ivey said. "I just imagine he's opposed to it. I don't care about Molthop's observation. I was looking for a report from the Civil Service Board. But anyone who has any input in this thing is great with me."

Ivey said having firefighters out on the street would not impede their response to a fire call.

"If we were to hire them [community service officers] from the marketplace, it would cost the city about \$16,500, and by doing it this way it would be utilizing them more efficiently and it would cost the city

less," Ivey said. "I think Molthop is just afraid he's going to lose his people. He wants to keep his hand on his people."

After reading Molthop's report, City Manager David Harden said he has doubts about the feasibility of the community service officers proposal as presented by Ivey. The civil service commission has postponed a recommendation on Ivey's proposal pending further study of it and Molthop's comments.

"The proposal as initially outlined by Commissioner Ivey has some scheduling problems and I think Chief Molthop analyzed those pretty thoroughly," Harden said. "From what I do know, I think it's a valid concept ... something that would be good for Winter Park."

Police Chief Raymond Beary said he would like to see the city have a community service officers program. The question is whether it would be through using city employees or hiring new ones. In his report, Molthop proposed that a community service officers program using off-duty police and firefighters be created.